

# Sixth straight lead exceedance prompts calls for speedier Benton Harbor pipe fixes

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Benton Harbor's troubled water system has exceeded Michigan's lead action levels six straight times in the last three years, prompting residents to pressure city and state officials to speed efforts to replace the lead pipes they contend are the main culprit.

The southwest Michigan city issued a public advisory this month noting it found more than 10% of recent water samples from 78 homes exceeded the action level of 15 parts per billion for lead, resulting in an average reading of 24 parts per billion.

Benton Harbor, located off Lake Michigan and adjacent to the wealthier St. Joseph, has had lead-in-water results since 2018 that have exceeded state limits and are considered dangerous to the public's health.

The city's every-six-month testing was triggered by those initial elevated levels.



Benton Harbor's six consecutive lead action level exceedances are "more than any other community in Michigan," in recent memory, said Elin Betanzo, a former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official and water quality engineer who helped uncover the lead-tainted water crisis in Flint.

"The data collected in Benton Harbor over the past four years show concerning lead levels throughout this community where half the service connections or more may be made of lead," said Betanzo, who has a consulting firm called Safe Water Engineering in Oakland County. "That's four years of residents at risk of consuming a potent neurotoxin every single day in every glass of water, accumulating lead in their bodies and the health effects that come with that exposure."

The state's Lead and Copper Rule requires that cities with lead service lines be tested annually, and if levels exceed limits, it triggers six-month sampling.

City engineers, who have said 170 lead lines have been replaced since 2019 with borrowed state funds, anticipate that by 2024, the city could replace an additional 900

or so pipes with \$5.6 million in federal funds the city received in June. They estimate there are close to 2,390 lead pipes in the city, meaning replacement plans would fall short of the city's needs.

But the city should replace large numbers of pipes and do it faster, residents said this past week, since even low levels of lead in children can lower academic achievement, decrease hearing, harm kidney function and create more problems with behavior and attention-related disorders. Lead exposure also can harm adults.

"The lead levels here are outrageous, and it seems like nobody really wants to talk about it," said the Rev. Edward Pinkney, a civil rights activist who has been critical of city and Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy officials. "To me, they don't take the lead levels seriously."

Although the state has passed out water filters, many of the residents didn't know how to properly install them on their faucets or replace the cartridges, said Pinkney, who leads the Benton Harbor Community Water Council.



State officials have said it's unclear why elevated levels of lead began in Benton Harbor with the 2018 monitoring period and not earlier, but it likely is due to a change in sampling protocols and locations by the city.

Michigan's environmental regulators created an outreach task force this spring to work to identify and replace lead lines and provide the public with regular updates. The state of Michigan has mandated communities replace all lead service lines by 2041.

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For Pinkney and others in Benton Harbor, the 20-year period to replace the lead pipes "in a city that is about four miles" long "doesn't make any sense."

Michigan's mandate requires municipalities to replace 5% of their lead service lines every year. The rule also requires municipalities with lead exceedances, such as Benton Harbor, to increase that rate to 7% unless they can reduce the lead levels through treatment, state officials said.

"They should be able to finish every home here with pipes from the house to the street in five years easily," Pinkney said. "This is not Detroit. This is not Flint. This is a very, very small community."

By comparison, Newark, New Jersey, had its first lead action level exceedance in 2017, and as of the first month of 2021, the city replaced 16,577 lead services lines, according to the city of Newark's website.

Chris Cook Abonmarche — who heads Abonmarche Consultants, the contracted engineering firm for Benton Harbor overseeing pipe replacement — said there is a

"contractor capacity" issue the city faces in expediting the process because it takes time to plan and implement.

"It could take as long as a decade, but of course the community's under obligation to have the lead service lines replaced in 20 years, so 10 is an improvement," Abonmarche said. "But 10 (years) does not satisfy the needs and desires of the residents right now. Of course, they want it quicker."

Carmela Patton, 43, a lifelong resident of Benton Harbor, said the lead problem is "sickening." Her 18-year-old daughter has had learning challenges, and she wonders if they are the result of lead exposure.

"I don't know if it's from her drinking the water, growing up off the water, not knowing it was that bad," said Patton, who also has a 7-year-old child. "I hate for them to brush their teeth, wash their face, let alone bathe in it."

Patton said Benton Harbor gets overlooked by state and federal officials. "Like Flint went nationwide everywhere. The only time we get blown up is when they want to talk about the killings and the shootings," she said.

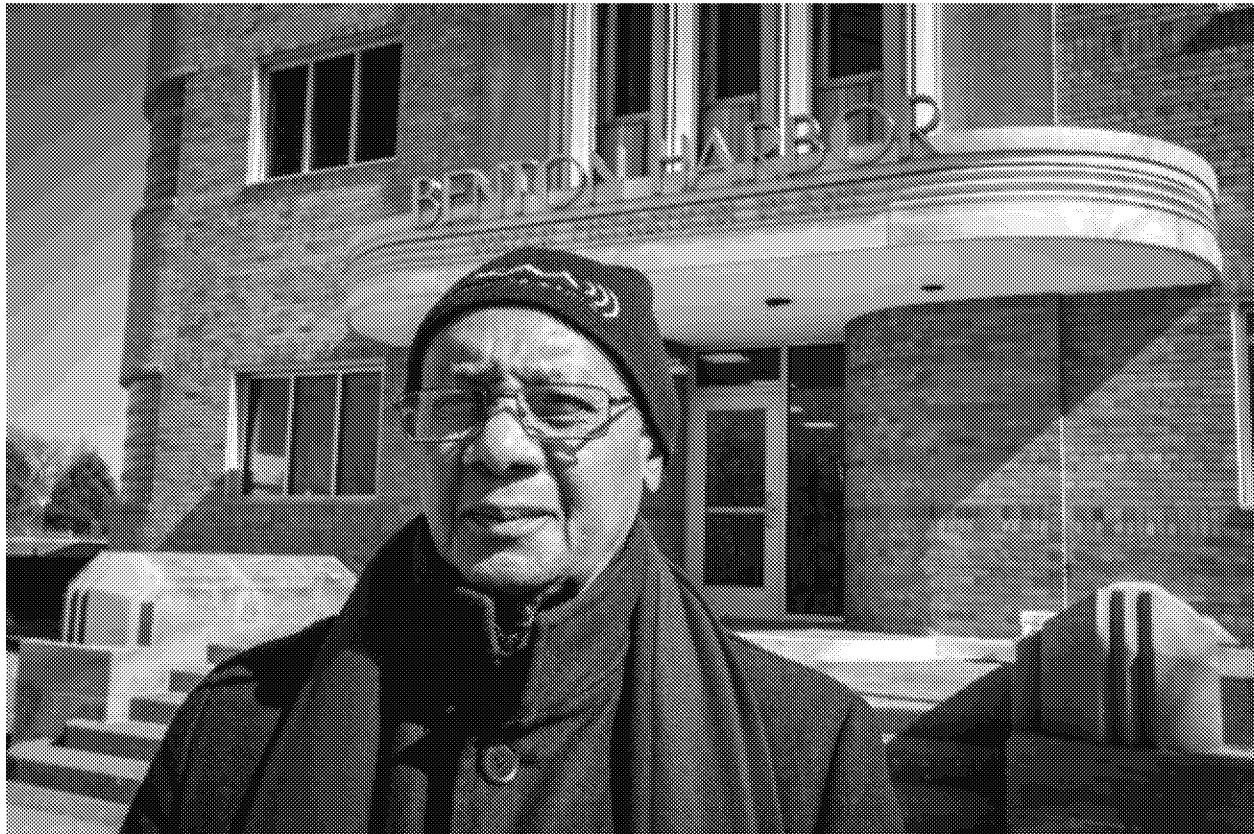
About the 20-year period to get the pipes replaced, Patton said, "I pray we're all still here to witness it."

## **Replacement 'takes time'**

Benton Harbor officials in June finally received \$5.6 million in EPA grant funds initially approved under the administration of former President Barack Obama to replace hundreds of lead service lines.

But Mayor Marcus Muhammad said the city manager did not share the funding had been received with him and the council, and that he had been unaware the money had been officially allocated by the EPA on June 7. City Manager Ellis Mitchell could not be reached for comment.

Muhammad said he has used his office as a "bully pulpit to illuminate the issue and the problem (of lead) and the need for it to be corrected" and that he should have been informed.



He said he's happy the funding has arrived and "that the work is going forward unbeknownst me knowing all the nuts and bolts and the details of what's happening right now on the ground."

"One home is one too many to exceed the lead level," Muhammad said.

The city is also vying for \$15 million more in loans from the state that along with the federal EPA funds would replace up to 90% of the pipes, Muhammad said.

An investigation is needed to figure out how many pipes are actually lead, he said.

"These things have to run hand in hand, and I think we're going to know a lot after this first and second phase of investigations and know truly how many remain,"

Abonmarche added.

The city has used part of the EPA funds to hire a consultant to conduct a corrosion control study as required by the state that should take six to 12 months, said Jason Marquardt, an official with Abonmarche. In addition, bids have been put out to contract 100 service line replacements as part of the first phase that would be completed next April.

Marquardt said another construction contract will go out in the winter to replace another 260 pipes after next spring. The city will then replace 260 pipes in each phase until the grant money is depleted, he said.



## **Sampling ramps up**

EGLE officials said they are committed to working with Benton Harbor to get the lead amounts reduced in its drinking water.

Residents have been advised "how to protect themselves by taking actions ranging from running their water in the mornings prior to first use to obtaining a lead reducing water filter," EGLE spokesman Scott Dean said.

The Berrien County Health Department has been providing free filters to residents with funding from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Dean noted although the city has made updates to its water treatment plant, much of the city's water distribution system is around 100 years old.

"Several water mains and lead service lines were installed in the first half of the 20th century, and many homes built before the 1960s are likely to have lead service lines or pipes that pose a health risk to residents," he said.

The city installed corrosion control treatment technology at its water plant in March 2019 to reduce the amount of corrosivity in the water, Dean said, and is increasing the monitoring of lead and copper in drinking water.

"Benton Harbor is now sampling twice as many homes as it did previously and increased the testing frequency to every six months instead of every three years," Dean said. "The increased testing will help measure the effectiveness of the corrosion control treatment in lowering lead levels."

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